

SERMON- Year A (Proper 8)

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Genesis 22:1-14

Psalms 13

Romans 6:12-23

Matthew 10:40-42

St. Timothy's (Herndon)

July 2, 2023

I speak to you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN

TEST:

“This is a test, this is only a test. This is a test of the Emergency Broadcast System.”

When those words come across your television screen, along with that atonal sound, we know what to expect, we don't like the interruption but understand its necessity. It's clear to all involved what is happening

Our Old Testament reading today begins with a similar announcement... But the difference is that Abraham does not know that he is being tested. There is no qualifying “only” to assure Abraham that this is just a drill, practice. That “this is only a test.”

That, of course, makes all the difference in the world.

We are not Abraham, we cannot know his thoughts and fears, but we know from Scripture that this was not the first test that he had undergone. God had tested him with migration from his homeland, with the lack of a child, then with a child, Ishmael, born by his midwife Hagar but then sent away to certain death, then the miraculous birth of a joyful son by his wife Sarah at a late age, and now this test, what must have seemed like a cruel joke.

Abraham, of course, passes the test, and thus he has been held up by Jews and Christians as the “exemplar of faith” as the model representation of trust and obedience to God.

Still, it's one of the most difficult passages in all of Scripture, as it confronts parents especially in a way that few other stories can.

Today at the 10 AM, we will celebrate another baptism at St. Tim's, Miss Olivia Grace Cliff, a beautiful child, not yet 4 years old.

I still don't quite know what I am going to say then to make it all make sense. I do know, as a reward to our children for sitting so politely through last week's VERY LONG sermon by the Bishop, that I am going to make it fun.

How do you that with this no good, very bad, terrible sounding story?

CANON

If the option existed to discard it, or the book of Genesis, or maybe the whole Old Testament, or at least the parts that we don't like, that might be a solution. OR, one might steer oneself to the Gospel reading, where Jesus says that simply a "cold cup of water" will earn our reward.

That's a far cry from the price of one's son, one's only son, the one that he loves.

The story troubles and horrifies yet there it sits in our Bibles, in the lectionary, in our bulletins today, and most deeply in our hearts.

The skill of the narrative, the high stakes of what's being tested, means we don't look on the story of Abraham and Isaac as onlookers. We are IN the story, we are participants in the action. Here, Scripture grabs and holds our attention in a way that it sometimes does, but not always, and rarely to this degree.

The Bible here makes demands on us that we are uncomfortable with.

So, we return to Abraham and Isaac, Isaac and Abraham, the knife and the wood. And also to Sarah and Hagar and Ishmael. And most especially to God.

How do we make sense of this story?

EXPLANATIONS:

One response is to admit that we are not as distant from the violence in this account as we might like to think—we cannot shrug this story off as characteristic of an ancient time...

So we DO sacrifice our children to violence—be it overseas in war, or on the streets and our schools as the victims of gun violence, or as future generations to poor environmental policies.

We do, and we do it all the time, but God doesn't, not here.

The title of the story should then not be "The Sacrifice of Isaac" but rather the "The Binding of Isaac" because God does not sacrifice one of our children here, but he will sacrifice his child later.

Again, tough stuff. A few weeks ago we baptized an 'Isaac' at St. Timothy's, and I talked about how that name means "laughter"...

maybe that's as good a place as any to go with this unfunny story.

ISAAC:

Isaac is the very first person who tries to understand what God is up to here: In the middle of the story, Isaac asks his father with a mixture of curiosity and naivete: “Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham must offer some explanation, some attempt to explain to him what is going on at that moment. Racked with fear and guilt and anxiety, Abraham is incapable of a full explanation.

Children ask questions like: “Why is life not fair?” AND “Why did she have to die?” In attempting to answer questions like these, parents and adults get a glimpse of Abraham’s struggle. A reasonable explanation is impossible. Isaac then learns what all children learn at some point, that adults’ explanations sometimes don’t make sense.

GOD:

The better question becomes then not “what does this test say about Abraham?” He is not the protagonist. The better question is: “what does it say about God?”

After God intervenes in Isaac’s rescue, we hear the words from the angel: “For now I know that you fear God.” This implies that God did not know before, that God did not know the outcome. It was all in the balance. It was not a scene being acted, like a Greek tragedy, by knowing actors fated to play a part, but a moment of great vulnerability between Abraham and God.

What it reveals is a relationship that hangs in tension. God desperately needed to know about Abraham’s faith, not his obedience. It shows that sometimes being in relationship with the living God hurts like hell. It’s bewildering. It’s the sort of difficult faith where a “sword will pierce your heart.”

So even though the test repels our moral conscience and logic and reason suggest that we dismiss it, yet we also know, from our own experience, that our lives of faith are indeed characterized by hardship, hopefully not of this nature, but by pain nonetheless, along with long silences and great happiness, by indecision and rapturous joy. Because of that, we recognize the need to wrestle with this difficult passage, to acknowledge its tensions and paradoxes, to study and reflect on them.

In a moment we will do the Renewal of Baptismal Vows pay attention to them, if you need a reminder about the difficulties that Christian life offers.

ABRAHAM & SARAH:

Abraham surrenders his beloved son to the God who made conception possible, the natural father hands the son, born outside the course of nature, to the divine father, who then hands the son back to Abraham. One can only imagine the uneasy eye contact throughout that exchange.

Ellen Davis writes that “The astonishing truth this story reveals is that God chooses to relate to the world not by compulsion but by trust. Yet trust is inherently a condition of vulnerability. You can be disappointed by the one you trust—and deeply, deeply hurt.”¹

Following this test, God’s blessing is renewed upon Abraham and Isaac lives to be a patriarch of the Israelite people. The trauma that this incident bestowed upon them both must have been penetrating, but the Biblical account does not speak to it, and perhaps that’s what haunts us the most, that everything seems to go on as normal.

We do read, however, in the very next chapter of the book of Genesis, that there was a casualty to the near-Sacrifice of Isaac. Isaac’s mother Sarah dies in the story that follows. There is no explanation given there either, and she was of advanced age, but it would be safe to assume that “A sword did indeed pierce her heart” upon hearing about the test that Abraham and Isaac had endured on Mount Moriah.

Both patriarch and matriarch, Abraham and Sarah, had lived a life of so many tests: they must have had the Emergency Broadcast System’s warning ringing in his ears permanently, life had become one long test, for better or for worse.

It would be a difficult lesson, but solace nonetheless, one that they could pass on to their descendants, the understanding that Life would feature:

“Nothing so unspeakable that God has not already thought of it, nothing so evil that God is not victorious over it...”

A life of faith is one where, however long it takes, nothing can destroy the future that God has promised. **AMEN**

¹ Ellen F. Davis, “‘Take Your Son’: The Binding of Isaac” in *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament*, (Cambridge & Boston: Cowley, 2001).